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SUBJECT: SALVADORAN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS MUDDLE AHEAD

11. SUMMARY: El Salvador's most prominent civil society organizations grew out of the nation's 12-year armed conflict, but many international donors have switched their focus elsewhere since the 1992 end of hostilities. Most Salvadoran NGOs are struggling to replace lost international support with local funding, and lack of communication and coordination among such groups is hampering their ability to fulfill their missions. END SUMMARY.

Background

12. From December, 2005 through February, 2006 poloff met with the leadership of ten local civil society groups, most of which were formed during the Salvadoran civil war. Although the groups are primarily local in membership, funding is generally derived from international sources, especially from Europe. Historically, El Salvador has enjoyed no strong tradition of participation in charitable or civil organizations, and unlike the U.S., few prominent figures are publicly associated with such groups. The groups, selected to provide a wide variety of viewpoints and agendas, included the University of Central America's Institute for Human Rights (IDHUCA), the Norma Virginia Guirola Institute of Women's Studies (CEMUJER), and the highly-respected Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES), the nation's best-known "think tank". The Salvadoran Indigenous Movement (MAIS) was included, as was the Olof Palme Foundation, which works to improve the welfare of poor and homeless children. COCIVICA is a strategic alliance of local NGOs involved in monitoring of elections and increasing civil participation in government. The ADESGOLFO, ASIGOLFO, and AINU associations are devoted to the development of La Union Department and the Gulf of Fonseca region. "Tercera Palabra" is a group of local businessmen in the initial stages of forming a new think-tank.

Current Conditions

13. The above NGOs operate freely in El Salvador without government interference; the biggest impediments to their achieving their goals appear to be societal attitudes and inadequate funding, communication, and cooperation. Given the lack of Salvadorans' contributions to such groups, most are supported primarily by international donors; several cited a decline in Swiss government support in recent years. Some have had success raising money from new sources, but with the notable exception of FUSADES (which is supported by private-sector funds), nearly every group inquired about the availability of USG funding.

Poor visibility and communication

14. MAIS indicated that poloff was the first diplomat who had

visited their offices, and outlined the traditional patterns of discrimination faced by indigenous people (see reftel A). Poloff's first meeting with MAIS representatives occurred against the backdrop of Hurricane Stan (October 2005), during which MAIS experienced serious difficulties in coordinating GOES relief efforts for remote indigenous communities. CEMUJER complained of poor relationships with other NGOs working on women's issues; they reported that their support for legalizing abortion in El Salvador has created friction with the Salvadoran Catholic Church. La Union NGOs ADESGOLFO, ASIGOLFO, and AINU receive funding from Japanese aid agency JICA; the Japanese are the primary financiers of the new deepwater port currently under construction there. Although the three organizations work in the same region and share similar missions, there appeared to be no communication or coordination of efforts among them.

Weak Finances and Poor Management

15. Financial concerns plague many of the individuals with whom poloff spoke. Several organizations, including COCIVICA, stated that they were changing their proposals to more closely match the funding opportunities from international donors. Emblematic of Salvadoran NGOs' problems with poor management is the plight of the Olof Palme Foundation, which in 2004 hired a new director who they also appointed as legal counsel. After the new director began firing longtime employees, changing objectives, and taking control of finances, the foundation's concerned board took steps to freeze the organization's resources, but the new director's near-absolute administrative, legal, and financial control has resulted in the freezing of more than USD 120,000 in assets. The case remains mired in the Salvadoran court system, and inasmuch as years may pass before the board will be able to access frozen assets, they may be forced to reopen the organization under a new name.

Outlook

16. A group of local businessmen and academics has recently formed a new think-tank, to be called Tercer Palabra⁸, membership in which will be by invitation only, and limited to prominent men and women in diverse fields. These invited members must be well-known public figures with reputations above reproach; based on members recruited so far, it appears that Tercer Palabra will be dominated by the views of highly-regarded Salvadoran academic figures.

17. COMMENT: Salvadoran civil society organizations, most of which were forged in the crucible of the country's 12-year civil war, have not evolved as rapidly as have other sectors of Salvadoran society. Lack of communication, cooperation, and coordination among NGOs of similar focus squanders their limited resources in duplicative efforts. Additionally, new areas of the world now in crisis demand the attention and resources of the international donors originally essential to Salvadoran NGOs' survival. Salvadoran civil society organizations must change their focus, and concentrate greater effort at garnering local support in order to succeed in their long-term goals; some may not be successful in the transition that lies ahead. END COMMENT.
Barclay